



**THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF-ACTUALIZATION OF FEMALE
CHARACTERS IN THE FILM *WADJDA* (2012) A FEMINIST REVIEW
AND ABRAHAM MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS**

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ABSTRACT

The film *Wadjda* (2012), directed by Haifaa al-Mansour, tells the story of a Saudi girl who rebels against gender norms with her ambition to obtain a green bicycle. This study examines Wadjda's psychological journey in fulfilling Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs—from basic needs, safety, love and esteem, to self-actualization—within a feminist framework. The method used is a semiotic text analysis of key scenes, combined with a qualitative descriptive approach. The results show that Wadjda's simple act of riding a bicycle becomes a symbol of women's independence and freedom in a patriarchal society, marking the phase of self-actualization. Meanwhile, the roles of the family, school, and patriarchal society reveal the overlapping dynamics of security and self-esteem needs. This study is significant as it enriches feminist scholarship with Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory in Arab countries from a psychological perspective, and offers a new perspective for analyzing non-Western films within gender and developmental psychology discourse.

Keywords: Wadjda, Feminism, Hierarchy of Needs, Abraham Maslow

INTRODUCTION

Arabic language, with its rich expressions and aesthetic values, has become a powerful medium for conveying the teachings of Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims around the world (Dede, Rohanda, and Yusuf 2024).

Literature is an imaginative work that uses language as a medium to convey values, emotions, experiences, and ideas aesthetically. Language is the primary tool in literature—without language, literature cannot be expressed or understood. Language in literature is not only a tool for communication but also a means of artistic and cultural expression. Studies in language and literature can anticipate various developments in science and technology, society, and professions. If we develop and adapt to advancements in the worlds of literature, art, and journalism, language and literature can also create job opportunities (Rohanda, 2018)

Film is a form of literature and one of the most powerful visual media for conveying ideology, cultural values, and even the hidden social struggles of everyday life. As a product of popular culture, film is not merely for entertainment but also plays a crucial role in shaping society's perceptions of identity, social roles, and individual and collective struggles. Through

film, narratives about injustice, social inequality, class struggle, and particularly the struggles of women can be articulated both symbolically and explicitly.

In the context of global cinema, the emergence of female characters who are not merely passive objects of narrative, but rather agents of change and resistance, has attracted the attention of many cultural and gender studies scholars. There are many literary works that depict women as stereotypes that have developed in real life, as lowly and weak. Patriarchy, which shapes social and cultural structures, is undoubtedly one of the causes (Deden, Rohanda, and Khomisah, 2022). Female characters in films are often depicted undergoing a process of self-discovery, resisting oppressive systems, and striving to break free from the social structures that constrain them. This journey is often referred to as an existential struggle—the effort of an individual, particularly a woman, to become her true self, achieving psychological, social, and identity freedom.

One approach that can be used to understand the struggles of female characters in this film is Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory. Maslow outlined five levels of human needs: physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Each individual moves from fulfilling basic needs toward the pinnacle of self-actualization, which is the state where a person is able to fully develop their highest potential (Maslow, 1970). Maslow emphasized that the process toward self-actualization does not occur instantly, but rather through internal and external dynamics, including the social and cultural pressures faced by the individual.

In the context of the ongoing trend toward digitalization and globalization (Alandira and Rohanda, 2025), films are not merely a form of entertainment, but also a means of cultural reflection, a vehicle for social messages, and an educational medium. In the dynamics of communication, the media does not merely convey information, but also reproduces reality as interpreted through an ideological lens (Alandira, 2025).

With increasingly advanced technology, films play an important role in shaping perspectives and strengthening identities amid the tide of globalization. In this era of globalization and rapid development of information technology, cross-cultural interactions have become increasingly intense. Globalization has driven the rapid exchange of culture and information (Saladin, Akmaliah, and Rohanda, 2025). In many films with social and feminist themes, this process of self-actualization becomes the core narrative of the female characters' struggles. Films not only depict internal conflicts within characters but also clashes with patriarchal social systems that limit women's roles. Therefore, analyzing films from psychological and feminist perspectives is crucial to uncovering how women construct their own meanings of life amid existing social pressures. Films from the Arab world, particularly the Middle East, have a unique approach to narrating women's positions and struggles (Isnaini, dkk, 2023). Arab cinema often presents conflicts between tradition and modernity, between religious values and social demands, and between individual desires and cultural control. Female characters in Arab films are often depicted as struggling not only to obtain basic rights but also to define themselves within a system that tends to be masculine and conservative.

In this context, Haifaa al-Mansour's film *Wadjda* (2012) (Al-Mansour, 2012). is particularly relevant for analysis. As the first feature film directed by a Saudi woman and produced entirely in Saudi Arabia, *Wadjda* serves as a symbolic and political statement on the limitations of women in Saudi Arabian society. The film tells the story of a young girl

named Wadjda who has a simple yet controversial desire within the local culture: to own her own bicycle to compete with her male friends. While this desire may seem trivial in other cultural contexts, within Saudi society it represents a form of resistance against deeply ingrained gender norms.

Wadjda's desire to own a bicycle is not merely about a child's toy, but a symbol of her desire for freedom, independence, and the courage to challenge norms. The process of achieving this desire can be understood as a journey toward self-actualization, where she must overcome various social, emotional, and structural obstacles (Dini, Supriadi, and Rohanda, 2024). In this context, Maslow's psychological approach provides an important framework for understanding the dynamics of Wadjda's motivation—from basic needs to self-actualization.

Furthermore, through a feminist lens, the film shows how women can be active subjects in determining their own destiny, even in environments that severely restrict their movement and freedom. Wadjda is not a heroic figure in the revolutionary sense, but her strength lies in her simplicity and consistency in fighting for her rights as a whole human being.

Based on feminist studies, particularly existentialist feminism, Wadjda's struggle in this film shows a form of female resistance against patriarchal culture that limits her freedom of movement. She refuses to submit to social rules that restrict women's freedom and instead strives to construct her own identity as an independent individual (Rohanda, Alandira 2024).

In the study by Triyani, Choironi, and Rahmawati (2023) titled “The Representation of Women's Existence in Haifaa Al-Mansour's Film Wadjda (An Existentialist Feminist Analysis of Simone de Beauvoir),” it is explained that Wadjda becomes a symbol of women daring to challenge the patriarchal system in Saudi Arabia. Through her courage to dream of owning a bicycle and competing in a space traditionally deemed male-dominated, Wadjda embodies the existentialist notion of womanhood as proposed by Simone de Beauvoir—that women are not “the other,” but active subjects capable of freely choosing their own paths in life (Triyani, dkk, 2023). Building on this idea, this paper will analyze how the struggle for self-actualization of the female character in the film Wadjda is depicted visually and narratively, through a feminist approach and Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory.

Previous research serves as a reference for subsequent research, including research conducted by Mohammad Yusuf Setyawan entitled “Differences in Language Patterns between Men and Women in the Film Wadjda: An Analysis of Gender Difference Theory” (Setyawan, 2021). This journal discusses the differences in language patterns between male and female characters in the film Wadjda using a gender language difference theory approach. Setyawan refers to the view that men and women have different tendencies in their language styles—women tend to be more expressive, cooperative, and polite, while men are more direct, competitive, and dominant. Through an analysis of the film's dialogue, the journal reveals how sentence structure, intonation, word choice, and the way opinions are expressed reflect these differences, while also showing how culture and social structure influence how male and female characters communicate.

Furthermore, research conducted by Tasya Aufa et al. entitled “Speech Acts and Language Variation in the Film Wadjda: A Sociopragmatic Analysis” (Hasan, Kuswardono, and Rahmawati, 2022). analyzes how speech acts (such as directive, representative, and expressive) and language variation are used by the characters in the film Wadjda. This study employs a sociopragmatic approach, which combines social aspects and the pragmatic

functions of language. The results indicate that the characters' language choices reflect power relations, gender identity, and social norms within Arab society.

Unlike the two previous studies that focused on language and communication aspects in the film Wadjda, this study, titled “The Struggle for Self-Actualization of Female Characters in the Film Wadjda (2012): A Feminist Review and Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs,” offers a humanistic psychology and feminist approach, focusing on the self-development of the main female character. This study is significant because no previous research has linked Wadjda's struggle with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, and it contributes new insights into the dimension of female self-actualization within a patriarchal cultural context.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with content analysis, as the focus of the study lies on the interpretation of visual narratives in films as a medium of social and psychological representation (Creswell, 2013). Research is essentially an effort to carefully and critically search for and interpret literary texts (Rohanda, 2016). The researcher uses a qualitative descriptive approach, which allows the researcher to analyze symbols, dialogues, and characters' actions in depth within a specific cultural and social structure. By utilizing this approach, the researcher seeks to understand how the struggle of women is depicted in films and how the psychological needs of the main characters are fulfilled based on Abraham Maslow's theoretical framework.

Data collection was conducted by repeatedly watching the film Wadjda (2012) by Haifaa al-Mansour to identify scenes, dialogues, and visual symbols related to the main character's struggle to fulfill her needs. Additionally, secondary data in the form of theoretical books, scientific journals, and articles related to feminist studies and Maslow's psychology were also reviewed to strengthen the analysis. The data obtained was then analyzed using an interpretive approach, which involved interpreting the implied meanings in the actions and words of the character Wadjda. The primary focus is on how the five layers of Maslow's needs—physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization—are reflected in the film's plot. This analysis is also combined with feminist theory to uncover forms of female resistance against patriarchal domination in a closed cultural environment.

Reasons for Selecting the Film Wadjda

The film *Wadjda* was chosen as the subject of study because of its significance in the world of Arab feminist cinema. It is the first feature film directed by a Saudi Arabian woman, Haifaa al-Mansour, and the entire production process took place in Saudi Arabia, which has strict rules regarding women. The narrative presented in Wadjda is not only a social critique of the position of women in society, but also voices hope and enthusiasm for change from within the system itself (Habibah, 2024). The character Wadjda is portrayed as a young girl with a simple desire: to own a bicycle. However, in the local culture, this desire becomes a form of resistance against the norms that restrict women.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Struggle in social studies is usually understood as the efforts of individuals or groups to achieve certain goals, overcome social or structural barriers, and claim space within systems that limit them. The characterization of literary works that can be used as sources of value in Islamic education, study materials, and Islamic character education values in literary

learning (Rohanda, 2022), whether written literature or film media. In the context of film and feminist studies, struggle is often associated with the efforts of female characters facing patriarchal domination, gender inequality, and social restrictions (Fakih, 2013). Female characters in film narratives are typically portrayed through internal (psychological) and external (social) dynamics, which are further explored as processes of self-identity formation, fulfillment of basic needs, and self-actualization.

According to Abraham Maslow, human needs are arranged in a hierarchical pyramid, including (Mulyono and Fitriana, 2025)

- 1) Physiological Needs: basic biological needs such as eating, drinking, and sleeping—the main factors for (physically) surviving.
- 2) Safety Needs: the need for physical and psychological protection, such as feeling safe from danger or uncertainty.
- 3) Social Needs (Love & Belonging): the need to feel part of a community, have relationships, and be socially accepted—including friendship, love, and a sense of belonging.
- 4) Esteem Needs: the need for recognition and appreciation—self-esteem and from others (status, recognition).
- 5) Self-Actualization: the pinnacle of the pyramid—the need to realize one's talents, potential, existential meaning, creativity, and personal growth.

Maslow explains that basic needs must be met before humans can fully develop their potential. The facts of humanity are the results of human activities or behavior; these facts can take the form of social activities, political activities, or cultural creations (Fatimah, 2020).

Dialogue in the Film Wadjda in the Analysis of Maslow's Theory and Feminist Review

A. The following is a dialogue that appears in an important scene, complete with minute numbers and interpretations according to the hierarchy of needs:

No	Character Dialogue	Time	Types of Needs
1.	Wadjda: « أريد أن أبيع هذه الأساور لأشتري الدراجة » “I want to sell this bracelet to buy a bicycle.”	(Minute 10:45)	Individual efforts to meet basic needs and security—the first step toward independence.
2.	Teacher: « البنات لا تتركب الدراجة، هذا الأمر غير مناسب للبنات » “Women should not ride bicycles; it is inappropriate for girls.”	(Minute 25:30)	The clash of patriarchal norms that hinder social needs, self-esteem, and actualization—a redemptive journey of gender norms.
3.	Wadjda (in front of friends): « أنا أستطيع أن أتعلم » « وأن أكسب السباق » “I can study and win competitions.”	(Minute 30:10)	The struggle to gain recognition and appreciation—entering Maslow's level of esteem needs.

4.	Wadjda smiling while riding a bicycle on the neighborhood road.	(Minute 90:05)	The stage of self-actualization—detecting the achievement of women's civil potential in the midst of a conservative culture.
5.	Wadjda's Mother: « يجب أن تدرسي جيدًا حتى يفتخر والدك بك » " You must study hard so that your father will be proud of you."	(Minute 15:22)	the need for love and belonging.

In the early stages, Wadjda tries to fulfill her physiological and safety needs independently, such as selling her personal belongings to get money to buy a bicycle. Wadjda's decision to sell her bracelet to buy a bicycle represents the first two layers of Maslow's theory, namely physiological and safety needs. In this context, the bicycle is not merely an object but a symbol of mobility, self-control, and personal safety—things that women in her social environment have long lacked. Wadjda's efforts demonstrate a young girl's initial attempt to meet her most basic life needs through methods she designed herself—without waiting for her parents' help, especially her emotionally absent father.

The next stage is evident in how Wadjda seeks social recognition and a sense of belonging. She experiences rejection from her community, which considers bicycles inappropriate for girls. The teacher's prohibition against girls riding bicycles shows how patriarchal structures hinder the fulfillment of psychological needs, such as belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. In Wadjda's case, social norms not only restrict physical activities but also hinder the development of her identity. She is seen as defying her nature simply because she wants to ride a bicycle. Yet, according to Maslow, the need for recognition, love, and growth is an important need on par with biological needs. However, this rejection only fuels her determination to prove herself, while also affirming that women's social needs are not limited to domestic relationships but also extend to public spaces.

Her struggle became even more apparent when she entered a *tilawah* (Quran recitation) competition to win a cash prize. When Wadjda declared that she could learn and win the competition, she demonstrated her enthusiasm to fulfill her esteem needs—the need for recognition, achievement, and self-confidence. She wanted to prove that women are also capable of achieving great things if given the opportunity. In a culture that marginalizes women, Wadjda's courage to speak publicly and express her ambitions is a manifestation of her growing self-worth, as well as an effort to change societal perceptions of girls.

The climax comes when Wadjda finally obtains the bicycle she has always dreamed of and rides it with confidence. This scene symbolizes the achievement of self-actualization in Maslow's theory, where she is able to realize her potential and desires despite having to overcome various social and cultural challenges. Symbolically, the bicycle serves as a metaphor for freedom and the right to determine one's own path in life, even when facing numerous social and cultural constraints. She did not merely purchase a bicycle; she reclaimed her right to freedom, autonomy, and self-fulfillment as a whole individual.

B. The following is a dialogue that appears in an important scene, complete with minute numbers and interpretations from a feminist perspective:

No	Character Dialogue	Time	Interpretasi Feminisme
1.	Wadjda (while watching a boy riding a bicycle): لماذا لا أستطيع ركوب الدراجة مثلهم؟ "Why can't I ride a bike like them?"	(Minute 12:10)	This critical question became an early form of gender awareness. Wadjda questioned structural prohibitions imposed solely on the basis of gender. This reflects a rejection of gender-biased social inequality.
2.	Wadjda to her mother: أريد أن أكون مختلفة، أريد أن أكون حرة "I want to be different. I want to be free."	(Minute 50:55)	This statement shows emancipatory awareness, namely the desire of female characters to free themselves from the social norms that constrain them. This is in line with existentialist feminist thinking, in which women have the right to determine their own path in life.
3.	School teacher (to Wadjda): مكان الفتاة في المنزل، وليس في الشارع أو السباقات "A woman's place is in the home, not on the streets or in competitions."	(Minute 78:00)	This dialogue illustrates social control over women's bodies and movements. This statement represents a patriarchal view that seeks to restrict women from public spaces.

In the opening dialogue, Wadjda expresses a natural awareness of gender. This is the first stage in the feminist struggle: recognizing that there is social inequality based on gender. The question is not merely a complaint, but a form of protest against a system that has normalized discrimination against women. Here, it becomes clear that women can recognize male dominance in public spaces from an early age, even in something as simple as riding a bicycle.

Furthermore, the second dialogue, namely Wadjda's statement that she wants to be different and free, is a form of existential feminism, as explained by Simone de Beauvoir, that women are not passive beings who accept their fate. Wadjda seeks to redefine who she is, not as the "good girl" version society expects, but as a free individual with the right to dream. This is a rebellion against the social structure that forces women to be obedient, submissive, and conformist. With those words, she takes control of her own life narrative.

Furthermore, in the final dialogue in Wadjda's statement, that women should only be at home is a clear reflection of the patriarchal ideology that limits women's roles to the domestic sphere. However, the film presents this for criticism and refutation through the character of Wadjda. She proves that women also have the capacity to participate in the public sphere, compete, and even challenge social norms. The feminist perspective in this scene highlights that education and freedom are not exclusive to men.

The table above shows the strong correlation between the stages of needs in Maslow's theory and Wadjda's struggles in the film. Each scene reflects how human needs, from basic needs to self-actualization, can be hindered or fought for by a woman in a patriarchal social system. The film emphasizes that women's struggles are not merely physical, but also psychological and social, making a feminist approach highly relevant for analyzing it.

Referring to Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, Wadjda's struggle appears gradual, starting from basic needs to self-actualization. Meanwhile, through a feminist lens, this film raises the voice of women's resistance against the patriarchal social system, while also presenting hope for women's equality and freedom in the midst of a conservative culture.

CONCLUSION

The film Wadjda presents a powerful narrative about a young woman's struggle to meet her basic needs, which, when viewed through Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory, reflects four important stages. (1) Physiological and safety needs are depicted when Wadjda tries to earn money on her own to buy the bicycle she dreams of. (2) social needs emerge when she faces rejection from her community but continues to strive for acceptance and recognition as an individual woman, (3) the need for esteem is evident as she fiercely competes in a race to gain recognition and self-worth, (4) self-actualization is achieved when she finally obtains the bicycle and rides it with confidence, symbolizing freedom and personal achievement.

Through a feminist lens, Wadjda's struggle reflects resistance to patriarchal values that limit women's freedom of movement. She not only rejects the traditional gender roles imposed on her, but also charts her own path toward independence and self-liberation. The film is an important representation of how women can transcend social boundaries by gradually fulfilling their psychological and social needs.

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